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Mother gropes for answers in death aboard jet

Blake Morrison

LAS VEGAS Since she kissed her son goodbye at the airport Aug. 11, Janet Burton can't help but wonder what happened aboard Flight 1763. From the newspapers, she read that 19-year-old Jonathan, the youngest of her three sons, stormed the cockpit of the Southwest Airlines jet during the short trip from here to Salt Lake City. From the FBI, she learned that passengers -- as many as eight -- subsequently restrained her 6-foot, 190-pound son until the jet landed safely in Utah.

From seeing his body -- the black ring around his neck and the bruises on his face -- she began to suspect that he hadn't died from a heart attack after all, as officials first thought. And then, last week, from an autopsy completed by a Utah medical examiner, she learned an awful truth: that Jonathan Burton had been beaten and choked to death aboard the Boeing 737, apparently by the passengers who sought to restrain him.

She knows little else, she said from her home here Thursday. And no one, she said -- not the airline, not the FBI or the U.S. attorney's office, which declined to pursue charges against those involved in her son's death -- has offered any answers.

"They said Jonathan had disrupted the flight and had to be restrained," Janet Burton said, recounting her first conversations with FBI agents investigating the case. "But why? Why did he need to be restrained? Or, did he even need to be restrained? Nobody will tell us anything."

Her lawyer, Kent Spence, calls the case bizarre. "I don't think there's ever been anything in the history of commercial aviation where someone's been pummeled and killed," he said.

Even the FBI agrees. "It's strange," special agent Bill Matthews conceded this week. Still, he said, "we're just not going to make any further statements."

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Even the FBI agrees. 'It's strange,' special agent Bill Matthews conceded this week. Still, he said, 'we're just not going to make any further statements.'

But Thursday, after Janet Burton made her case on national TV during CBS' Early Show, Southwest Airlines began to offer new details about what took place.

Although Spence said the airline had refused to let him review statements it had collected from people aboard the flight, Southwest spokesman Ed Stewart helped reporters contact at least one passenger, Christy Gibson. She said she was convinced that Jonathan Burton was high on drugs the night of the flight.

Just 20 minutes out of Salt Lake City, Gibson said, she noticed Burton pacing the aisle. 'At one point, he went to the front of the plane and said, 'Everyone just sit down,' or something like that,' she recalled. When a flight attendant asked him if he was OK, Gibson said, Burton replied, simply: 'No, I'm fine. It's just the drugs.'

Southwest's Stewart said autopsy results showed traces of cocaine and THC, the principal active ingredient in marijuana, in Burton's blood.

But Spence, who said he was quoting from the autopsy, insisted that the medical examiner concluded that there was 'no evidence of physical abnormalities associated with cocaine-induced delirium. . . . The finding of acute intoxication with THC is an unlikely explanation for the decedent's behavior, though the possibility cannot be excluded.'

'The autopsy report doesn't attribute any behavior to drugs, as I read it,' Spence said. 'The story has been shaped as 'one passenger goes berserk.' But I can only speculate that maybe Jonathan was being disrespected by the flight attendants and wanted to talk to someone in authority,' so he headed toward the cockpit.

Neither the airline nor Spence would release a copy of the autopsy, and neither Gibson's version of the flight nor that of another passenger quoted this week matches Spence's suggestion.

Gibson said Burton acted 'like a caged animal. It seemed to me like he was having a panic attack. He really acted truly frightened to be on the plane.'

After pacing the aisles, Gibson said, Burton returned to his seat, then sprung up and ran to the cockpit. 'He was jumping up and karate kicking (the door), jumping up with both feet off the ground.' She said she saw Burton kick a panel from the door before he headed back toward his seat. There, she said, other passengers restrained him and buckled him into a seat behind her row.

When it came time to land, the crew decided to move Burton because he was sitting in an exit row, Gibson said. She recalled a flight attendant introducing a man to Burton by describing the man as a police officer. She said Burton 'absolutely went ballistic,' punching the man in the face. She said he also attacked other passengers. 'He'd punch someone and scream, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' '

Another passenger, Dean Harvey of Canada, also recounted Burton kicking in the

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cockpit door after running down the aisle, shouting, 'I can fly this plane. I can fly this plane.' Harvey told The Edmonton Journal that Burton grabbed both pilots, a contention Southwest vehemently denied. Harvey said Burton hit passengers several times before being restrained. But Harvey questioned whether passengers used too much force to subdue Burton.

He said one passenger even leaped repeatedly onto Burton's chest while four men restrained the 19-year-old. 'I asked him to stop,' he said of the passenger jumping on Burton. 'I said, 'You've got the guy subdued, what more do you want? You don't have to pound his head in.' The guy was being held with his arms outstretched. He had no chance to absorb the shock.'

When Janet Burton read Harvey's account Thursday, it was her first glimpse inside the cabin of Flight 1763. But the story did little to answer the questions that have kept her up at night.

She doesn't believe her son was high the night of the flight, and she never knew him to use cocaine.

Jonathan was, she said, the most polite of her three sons -- 'the only one who would still open the car door for me.' Burton most recently worked at a retirement home and was once voted employee of the month for showing 'exceptional compassion to the residents.'

Southwest spokesman Stewart said he and others are convinced that 'it was a very dangerous situation, and everyone acted appropriately' during Flight 1763.

Janet Burton wishes she could be sure.

Frustrated by the airline and authorities, she said she hopes passengers will call Spence's office at 307-733-8606 to share their recollections of Flight 1763. She said she hasn't ruled out filing a lawsuit, but until she knows what took place, she can't say for certain what she will do. 'It's just so horrible,' she said of the accounts she has heard so far. 'But I want to know exactly what happened.'

Contributing: Traci Watson

PHOTO, B/W, Family photo\ PHOTO, B/W, Red McLendon for USA TODAY

NOTES: The Nation; Son died while being restrained. The airline says 'everyone acted appropriately' in the incident.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

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